

Lama Yeshe's American College "Experewence"

In California, Professor Jan Willis fulfilled Lama Yeshe's desire for an American University 'experewence'. In the Spring trimester of 1978 he was to teach a course on Tibetan Buddhism at the University of California's Oakes College, on the Santa Cruz campus. Lama would teach Jan's class while she was on leave at Wesleyan University. Adele Hulse's recounting of the life and times of **Lama Thubten Yeshe** continues ...



Lama in lecturing position at UCSC

"We had to get hold of some Tibetan papers to prove Lama really was highly educated," said Jan. "Everything was very easy to arrange, probably because Lama was so keen to do it. He lived in the student accommodation, and Robbie and Randy Solick lived close by, in the married quarters. Robbie was appointed his official teaching assistant with Jon Landaw acting informally as another assistant. They led discussions and helped students with Buddhist terminology. Lama was to lecture two mornings a week and be available for interviews in his office on Wednesday afternoons."

Lama Yeshe loved everything about the job, especially spending his American wage, much of which went on flowers. He knew all the florists in Santa Cruz and was particularly fond of roses. A Social Security card came with his work permit.

Shopping for Kopan had given Ngawang Chotak enough expertise to land a job as a purchasing officer. However, his employer was going broke so he was free to move into Lama's apartment, sleeping upstairs in a little room off the kitchen.

Ngawang Chotak: "We did a lot of cooking together, Lama teaching me how. For breakfast he liked French

toast with lashings of butter and syrup as well as sausage or bacon and strong coffee with whipped cream. If Anila Ann had seen that she would have gone nuts. She was always on at me about his diet. I agreed with her at the time, but Lama claimed nobody knew his body like he did. 'I need strong food to keep it going – steak and milk.' He made these big *momos* but wouldn't let me buy ground beef for them, it had to be best steak and he'd chop it up himself. He didn't like ground beef: 'You don't know what's in that!' He loved his coffee. He started adding Half-and-Half, but said it wasn't strong enough, so moved on to whipping cream.

"One of his little games was to lie on his bed and play dead when I came into the room. Scared the hell out of me, but he thought it was a great joke. He didn't study too much for his lectures. He knew what to tell them. He spent a lot of time looking at magazines and had me read him some long articles. He also watched *Roots* on TV.

"Many, many people came to see him. Judy Weitzner always had access, and I heard him tell this lawyer to leave her husband. He was indefatigable and worked me to death. At 2.00 A.M. he'd want tea for twelve people or something. But he was just bliss to be with.

"One day I took him along to a Hopi Indian reservation and told him their prophecy about us all coming to the end of what they called the 'fourth world'. According to the Hopi, people will not be able to travel around so much anymore and many other aspects of life as we know it will disappear. 'I think they're right. Why do you think I travel around the world introducing Mahayana in so many different places at once?' said Lama."

Karuna Cayton's sister, Lori, enrolled in Lama's class and moved into the student building directly opposite his apartment. "My thing was always just to sit and watch him," she said. "The course was held in a big auditorium. Jon Landaw pushed a table up against the blackboard and placed a Tibetan carpet and a cushion on it. Lama came in, climbed up onto the table and sat down."

He was a hit from the first, and his lectures were packed. The Vajrapani people gate-crashed every one, driving in

from their primitive huts and showering in the university gym. They were careful not to act devotionally, which would be inappropriate in a college atmosphere. There were no prostrations, khata, flowers or incense, but whenever Lama entered the auditorium, always from the back of the room, the whole audience automatically stood as one. No one in America stands for professors, and on the first day the students didn't even know he was in robes until he got down the front. They just stood, every day.

The course covered the history and development of the various schools of Buddhist thought and the difference between them. Lama's lectures were always quiet and he took questions at the end. To one student who claimed working for others to gain merit was self-interest, he replied, "I can only work for my own enlightenment." To those with opposing views he said, "Good, I like debate!"

"He answered every individual question that all one hundred and fifty of us could come up with," said one of the few students who later took refuge. "Lama Yeshe treated us all as equals, and gave each of us a voice. He also instilled in me the possibility of attaining enlightenment in a single lifetime, because the complete teachings for doing that were all at hand. He could also be outrageous. He related directly with the students, but strictly within the confines of his Vinaya vows. No wine, women and song." During office hours Lama Yeshe patiently listened to everyone's tales of woe – horrible divorces and family traumas. He saw anybody at any time, and Robbie Solick often had to step in to ensure he got some time for himself.

"One day in a lecture Lama did a little snap of the fingers and twist of the wrist and pointed in my direction, causing the greatest delight I have ever experienced," said another student. "It was like the floor dropped out from under me, and what was left was this exhilarating joy. Lama Yeshe was known as a populist, but he was really a master of the yogic requirement of 'super-hiding,' of never revealing one's practice or realizations. He was so much more than a sweetie-pie. Outwardly, he taught us lam-rim but secretly, he taught the highest tantric practice to those who could fix their thoughts on him. Superficially, he was a nice Buddhist monk but, inwardly, he was a miracle-making *mahasiddha* of the first order.

"Some time later I found Lama Yeshe could enter dream states. I was sleeping and Lama was far away. I heard a telephone ring and then Lama was in my dream. I was convinced he was performing initiations, and when I asked Lama Zopa about it he got excited, but pretended he didn't quite understand what I was saying. Geshe Rabten was even cooler about it, indicating that such things happen all the

time. But all I had to do was think about Lama Yeshe, and there was an automatic response in me."

Lama's "first family," the Solicks, now with three small daughters, provided a haven for him. "Lama was forever telling his students what to do," said Robbie Solick. "He'd say: 'You be a monk, you go into retreat, you do this and that.' One day I asked him why he never told me what I ought to do. He said, 'Your family is your responsibility and Dharma practice right now. It is not necessary for me to tell you what to do.' Randy and I both got that message, so we made no demands on his time.

"He often came over to our place in his tatty red zip-up bathrobe and just hung out with us, lying on the couch, playing with the kids. Many nights I'd go over to his place to watch the late news with him. 'What's he saying, what's going on there, why is he doing that?' Lama wanted to know not just the story, but its history and ramifications. He was like that at the movies too," said Robbie.

The Solicks' two older girls were aged six and eight. One of them was in his apartment one day when he bent down and put his ear to a flower. "I'm listening to it," he told her. "He gave us Buddhist teachings we could understand," they said. "When we got really mad we'd go to our rooms and meditate. He said he was so proud of us for that. 'You are much brighter than many adults,' he told us. He gave us Tibetan names, and one day in the park he took us on separate walks beside a little creek and told us what our individual colors were and how to use them in meditation.

"On hot days he sometimes looked out over the ocean and said to us, 'What are we doing here, we have to go to the beach!' He wore these yellow shorts and we jumped through the waves together, holding hands. Somehow, whenever we were with him he seemed to be exactly the same size we were."

"Lama was a shape-shifter," said Randy. "He'd grow huge then shrink down real small. He could also be completely stern, then utterly soft. He really did appear differently to different people. He ate a lot of unhurried lunches with us, and never made us feel we were wasting his time, or he was too hard pressed to play with the children."

Lama Yeshe was not afraid to let people know when they were wasting his time. He simply went into his room and locked the door.

Before leaving Santa Cruz he gave the Solicks' baby daughter a *thangka* that one of the Kopan boys had painted. On the back he wrote, "My dear daughter Danielle, my blessings, love and memory of 1978. Three months you were my family and laughed one hundred times with me. Much love, Lama Yeshe." ❀